

Australia's CEO Challenge: Partnerships Addressing Domestic Violence

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Abstract

Australia's CEO Challenge is an organisation seeking social change in the community through an awareness of domestic violence and its impact, with a focus on the workplace. It has introduced an innovative community–business partnership approach through a program that brokers partnerships between the business sector and community organisations working in the domestic violence field.

An individual business partner supports its community partner, usually a women's refuge, through direct financial support or resources, provision of in-kind services and voluntary work, and other activities targeting the particular needs of that service and its clients. The refuge provides the business with advice and expertise on domestic violence issues, including specific workplace strategies to address impacts in the workplace and training to increase employee awareness. There are also other partners that provide services and resources for all participating refuges or that support the administration of the program.

Australia's CEO Challenge has succeeded in providing an original and effective program, as established through an independent evaluation carried out in its third year of operation. It also demonstrates good practice features identified in international research and practice literature for effective cross-sector partnerships.

This paper presents an overview of the program and its achievements to date, highlighting features that we consider have contributed to the effectiveness of this partnerships approach in engaging people to build safer communities.

Keywords

Business-community partnership, domestic violence, workplace response, Australia's CEO Challenge

Overview of the partnership approach

Australia's CEO Challenge (CEOC) is a partnership program between businesses and community organisations addressing domestic violence that began in Brisbane in 2000. Its goal is "safer communities through workplace action". Its objectives are:

- businesses that are committed to addressing domestic violence

- communities that are more informed about domestic violence
- partnerships that increase resources for domestic violence
- a sustainable model for partnerships against domestic violence.

The 'Challenge' is for CEOs to commit their organisation to become involved in this work. The rationale for companies accepting the challenge is that it makes good business sense, as domestic violence has a cost for business.

The recent report released by the Australian Government (Access Economics 2004) estimates the cost to the Australian economy from domestic violence at over \$8 billion in 2002–03. The production-related costs for business identified within this total cover the initial short-run disruption around temporary absenteeism and related management costs, and the longer-term costs around reduction in productive capacity from loss of the labour resource from disability or fatality, and from a reduced rate of earnings. These costs were estimated to be nearly \$484 million. However, a study in 2000 (Henderson 2000), specifically on the impact and costs of domestic violence on the Australian business and corporate sector, included a broader range of cost categories in its methodology, including transfer costs within the economy, and identified the cost could actually be as high as \$1.5 billion a year.

The model that CEOC is implementing seeks to achieve social change in the community, but takes as its focus the business and corporate sector. The social change is to be achieved by exposing business organisations to the realities of domestic violence through their involvement in a partnership. Thus the core of the program is individual partnerships between a single business and a refuge. The business partner supports the community organisation through direct financial support or resources, provision of in-kind services and voluntary work, and other activities targeting the particular needs of that agency and its clients. The community organisation provides the business with advice and expertise on domestic violence issues, including specific workplace strategies to address domestic violence impacts on the workplace and training to increase employee awareness. The rationale is that a business, through its involvement in the partnership, will be more receptive to the messages about domestic violence.

There are also corporate partners that provide services to all refuges involved in the program, for example, transporting and storing goods, or provide support for program administration and development, such as office space and equipment.

The partnerships are brokered and supported by the incorporated body, Australia's CEO Challenge Inc (CEOC), under a board of directors working in an honorary capacity. Both part-time staff/consultants and board members play a role to identify and match potential partners, broker a partnership agreement, provide ongoing mentoring and support to both partners,

undertake strategic development and review of the program, and provide administrative support to the program and organisation.

The program is also supported by triennial funding from state government and one-off community grants, but is largely reliant on the efforts of the participants volunteering their time.

Achievements to date

There are currently seven business–refuge partnerships with four in development, and six corporate partners. The partners represent a wide range of businesses, as well as state and local government business areas. The longest partnership has been operating for five years.

An independent evaluation conducted in 2003, the third year of the program, found that action taken by the business partners were targeted to meeting the refugees' priority needs, had provided at least one-quarter of a million dollars additional funding to the then eight partnered refuges through direct financial donations and value of goods and services. It had also contributed substantial value in the form of volunteer activities that incur little cost but have a dramatic impact on the quality of life of the women and children living at the refuge.

Contributions by business partners to their domestic violence service partners have included:

- a major renovation and refurbishment that has allowed a refuge to expand its services and provided a much better standard of accommodation for the women and children staying there
- improvement of indoor and outdoor children's play areas at several refuges
- donations of Christmas presents, including presents on behalf of the children at the refuge that they can give to their mothers on the day
- furniture and household items to help women and their families establish themselves in new accommodation upon leaving the refuge
- resurfacing of a driveway at a domestic violence service
- summer holiday swimming classes and an opportunity to meet and get tips from an Olympic swimmer for children at a refuge
- donation of equipment and furniture that have improved the services to clients and provided a better work environment for staff, including computers, photocopier, telephone system, facsimile machine, internet connection, office chairs and desks, and others
- free removal and storage of household effects for clients relocating and on behalf of the refuge after goods drives and donations
- design and development of database software for electronic document management at a refuge
- about 300 hours for one refuge through an employee volunteer scheme of 7.5 hours of paid work time a year, spent on a range of activities such as improvements to the refuge

garden and play areas, an IT audit, stock and stores control, and assisting on school holiday outings.

The evaluation also found that some businesses were active in addressing domestic violence issues and impacts in their own workplaces, supported by their partners and program staff.

Activities by the community organisation to assist the business partners have included:

- domestic violence awareness training courses and other presentations to staff at a number of business partner workplaces
- collaborative development of workplace policies relevant to domestic violence in two partnerships
- provision of domestic violence resource material
- counselling services for business partner staff offered by the community partner
- paintings by the children at the refuge used for the business partner's corporate Christmas cards.

Support for Queensland domestic violence services by corporate partners has included:

- half-price air fares with full-fare benefits for women and children moving as a result of domestic violence
- cut-price long distance bus fares
- reduced accommodation costs with a major motel chain
- assistance with furniture removal and storage.

Australia's CEO Challenge has been independently evaluated and is widely acknowledged as an innovative and effective partnership approach to domestic violence, receiving a number of state and national awards and commendations. These include Awards from the Queensland Government for community groups working in the domestic violence field, from the Australian Crime and Violence Prevention Awards, and awards from the Prime Minister's Community Business Partnership for specific partnerships.

Lessons learnt and strategies for successful partnerships

A recent review of the international research and practice literature on effective cross-sector service delivery partnerships (Henderson 2004) identified a number of features characterising successful partnership arrangements. The CEO Challenge program provides an example of how these features can be applied in practice, using a brokerage model to establish and support cross-sector partnerships for safer communities.

1. Strategic fit

One of the most important features identified in the literature review is strategic fit, that is, shared visions, common goals and compatible values between partners. This is a particular challenge in business–community organisation partnerships where very different organisational cultures meet. For example, corporate social responsibility is, of necessity, only one element of a profit and business growth perspective for the business sector, while for non-government organisations the primary focus is on delivering outcomes for clients, often through volunteer activity and shared community resources. There are different time pressures and time scale perspectives between the two, such that there can be divergent expectations and capacities for delivering on short timeframe commitments. There may be differing views about client privacy versus marketing opportunities that can have implications for the ways in which the company's role in the partnership may be promoted publicly. Community organisations do not necessarily have staff with the entrepreneurial outlook and skills to meet business sector expectations, and businesses may be less comfortable with a community organisation's outcome focus in which economic efficiency is not equated with success.

One of the benefits of the brokerage approach adopted under the CEO Challenge model is a support structure that works to maximise strategic fit by promoting a common understanding of goals and purpose, establishing consensual objectives, and assisting in bridging the different organisational cultures. The program pays particular attention to clarifying the vision and purpose of the program from the earliest point of identifying and negotiating program participation by a potential partner. There is a strong focus on creating the best fit between a particular business and refuge so that, as far as possible, it is not just needs and resource capacity of partners that are matched, but there is also an alignment of values and priorities. Program staff/consultants and directors also play an ongoing role in supporting individual partnerships, for example, by building skills and capacities for effectively engaging with the business sector where the community organisation has not had the relevant experience in managing cross-sector relationships of this kind.

2. Outcome focus

Outcome focus has also been cited in the literature as a critical success factor, that is, partnering to produce results not just activities. The CEO Challenge program has the very explicit outcome of 'safer communities through workplace action' and its objectives focus on result areas such as businesses being committed to addressing domestic violence and communities becoming more informed about the issue. Its purpose and actions are focused directly on achieving these sorts of outcomes, and potential partners are made aware from the beginning that this program is not about 'cheque book charity' but real engagement between partners for change. The results of the evaluation outlined in the section above provide evidence of outcomes achieved to date by the program. The individual partnerships

also participate in wider activities such as White Ribbon Day through their involvement with CEO Challenge.

3. Strong and positive relationships

Relationships that foster trust and mutual respect are another key factor underpinning successful partnerships. Effective relationship management and building strong personal relationships across different organisational cultures and engendering trust and confidence between partnering organisations is critical.

Australia's CEO Challenge brokerage model plays an important role in fostering strong partner relationships. Program staff/consultants organise and facilitate regular meetings of the business and refuge partners for sharing information and discussing implementation issues and progress across partnerships. There is a strong emphasis on networking, both with program staff/consultants and directors and between different business and refuge partnerships.

Partners are also involved in the corporate governance of CEO Challenge. Board positions are specified for business and community partner representatives, and parties signing a partnering agreement become partnering members of CEO Challenge.

4. Realistic expectations

Realistic expectations are important, in particular, balancing performance expectations and capacity and acknowledging long-term timeframes for achievements. This is particularly critical in the CEO Challenge context given the different cultures already described. The program's brokerage model provides an approach that allows for different expectations to be explored and clarified, separately for each potential partner in the first instance if necessary, and for a consensus position to be negotiated by a neutral third party where required.

Realistic expectations are made explicit through the process of signing a partnering agreement where the partners specify the types of services that will be exchanged between them. The agreements are for a two-year period and reviewed annually, understanding that the circumstances of partners are not static and may change, and that partnerships have a finite life. CEO Challenge is in the process of transitioning partnerships that have been in place for up to five years to ensure business partners maintain a connection to the organisation and community partners obtain a new business partner.

5. Genuine collaboration

The literature review also identified genuine collaboration as a key principle for effective partnership working, expressed through shared decision-making, planning, monitoring, problem solving, resource investment, and sharing of risks and benefits. The CEO Challenge

program identifies and brokers the establishment of individual partnerships and the signing of a partnership agreement, which is a statement of intent and not a legally binding document. While CEO Challenge provides support for the ongoing operation of a partnership as required, it is the responsibility of each partnership to establish its specific partnership objectives, and to decide what each partner will contribute to achieving the agreed outcomes and how they will work together in doing so. While the program provides infrastructure support and tools and resources to assist in doing this, it is the individual partnerships that directly collaborate to achieve the agreed objectives for that partnership, working together in ways that they have chosen together to best fit their particular circumstances.

6. Management and administration, communication, and resources

Principles underpinning the effective management and operation of any program also applies in a partnership model. There needs to be effective management in the form of efficient, accountable and transparent administrative structures, processes and activities as well as skilled people, adequate resources, and appropriate technology to support collaborative activity. There needs to be meaningful communication that is ongoing, timely, and open with honest dialogue on all matters relevant to the partnership. Obtaining and maintaining the right level and type of resources is always a critical challenge for any program of this type.

Resourcing strategies found to be effective by the CEO Challenge program include establishing a strong business case for government funding to establish and operate the program in its early years. It has also applied for grants offered by different organisations to undertake discrete projects, and is now focussing on building a sustainable funding base through membership under the incorporated company structure, and negotiating corporate partnerships that provide in-kind resources for program administration. CEO Challenge has recognised that it needs to build its organisational capacity through its own human resources as well as a strong corporate governance framework, particularly recognising its responsibilities as an incorporated body with tax deductibility status.

7. Accountability

Dual accountability is another important feature cited for successful partnerships cited in the literature, with there being collective accountability for joint governance established in addition to the individual accountability to the partners' own organisations that already exists. A formalised agreement that clearly sets out partnership purpose, common goals, joint objectives, roles and responsibilities, performance expectations, review mechanisms, and an exit strategy is seen as a key component.

Each CEO Challenge partnership is underpinned by a formal agreement as a precondition of program participation, signed by senior people in both organisations. It explicitly states the objectives to be achieved, relative roles and responsibilities of each partner and includes a

commitment to participate in program meetings and monitoring activities. Such a formal written agreement promotes accountability and clarity of expectations for individual partnerships. The written agreement underpinning each individual partnership and the legal governance obligations inherent in CEO Challenge's incorporated company structure promote accountability at both individual partnership and whole-of-program level.

8. Supportive environment

Another key element identified in the literature review is a supportive environment, with leadership and commitment from senior political and executive level and ownership at operational level. The name 'Australia's CEO Challenge' was purposely adopted to reinforce one of the principal elements of the program, that is, a partnership model that is supported and owned at the most senior levels of a company structure. Program participation is negotiated at CEO/Managing Director, or other senior executive level at the request of the CEO. Individual partnerships are marketed both internally and externally as an initiative from the highest management level. In some cases, CEOs of partnering organisations have taken action personally to refer and market the program to their peers. The experience of CEOC over various partnerships indicates that such support can be an important factor to predict the success and level of positive activity in a partnership.

9. A learning culture

Openness to innovation, mutual learning, and cultural change supportive of joint working is the final element identified in the literature review as characterising successful cross-sector partnerships. The Australia's CEO Challenge program has evolved over time, building on the lessons learnt over its five years of operation and from the sharing of the experiences of individual partnerships.

The organisation is committed to sharing its experiences with this innovative Australian partnership response to domestic violence. In this way, CEO Challenge can be a voice that contributes to building the knowledge base that is so important in developing effective responses to community safety concerns for domestic violence through engaging communities to work together for safer community outcomes. Further information about the program is available on the Australia CEO Challenge website <http://sites.ourbrisbane.com/ceo_challenge/home>.

References

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